

Shabbat Shalom

It seems that the pundits in the press, the talk shows, the radio call-in shows and the comedians have had their field day this past week with Governor Eliot Spitzer. Anyone with sensitivity understands that the situation represents a great tragedy and is reflective of the abuse of power. Undoubtedly, an ego that goes unchecked, whether it be hubris or some other mechanism leads to a repression of meaningful emotion and ultimately personal disaster.

I truly feel badly for his wife, Silda Wall Spitzer. There was an Op-Ed piece in the NY Times on Wednesday written by Dina Matos Mc Greevey of New Jersey, another wife brought to shame. Silda and Dina shared something with former President Bill Clinton's wife, Hillary. They all suffered through the great indiscretions and moral shortcomings of their husbands. They all experienced a profound break in trust, the foundation of relationship. They were brought to public forums and they, for reasons only they know, stood next to their men. The picture on the front page of the NY Times of Silda Spitzer was tragic. The shame and humility she had to have felt because of her husband's action is only intensified to the "Nth" power by the fact that she stood next to him during a public statement.

The Op-Ed piece in the New York Times makes the following statement, "We cannot judge women harshly, whether they stand by their husbands or not. It is almost beyond their ability to decide. So much takes place in such a short period of time. They receive direction from so many people that they live at least temporarily with a sense of powerlessness." To be powerless is to live with fear, to be powerless is to live with shame, to be powerless is to be a slave.

Whatever one may think of Silda Spitzer's decision to "stand by her man", or Dina Mc Greevey or Hillary, the subject provides my segway to the question of powerlessness and how we, through our texts, deal with an aspect of our own transformation from powerlessness to power.

I'm going to touch on two issues regarding the transformation from powerlessness to power. I'm going to look at them through the lens of personal power and also our national power.

In a few short days we will be celebrating the holiday of Purim. On Purim we will read Megillat Esther. The story of Esther, amongst other things is a tale of empowerment and transformation. Esther is the model of the individual Jew. In the understanding of the narrative there is special emphasis on her role as model for all Jewish women.

Martin Buber, one of the great religious thinkers of the twentieth century talked "a moment of truth." Such a moment occurs for most people, occasionally, maybe once or twice in a lifetime. A moment of truth is a moment that occurs when an individual is called to respond to a particular situation. It's a situation that often comes upon him or her unplanned and suddenly. It is a moment that demands a moral decision on the part of an individual. There are right responses and wrong responses and the individual knows it. If she or he makes the right response, it is clear immediately. The person will know the right decision has been made. If the wrong decision is made, it continues to haunt that person forever.

Mordecai serves as a catalyst for Esther. He has adopted her as a young orphan, encourages her to hide her origins, and sends her to the King's beauty contest. He pushed a terrible dilemma on her, a dilemma that would transform her from being an obedient, sweet little girl into becoming an adult leader. It was when Mordecai approached her and demanded that she appear before

Achashveyrosh that Esther faced her moment of truth. When she tried to evade the difficult responsibility that Mordecai thrust upon her, Mordecai encouraged her; pleaded for her threatened people. Esther replied with evasion by claiming, everyone knows the rules, no one can appear unannounced before the king without being killed. Mordecai wouldn't let her hide behind what is accepted governmental protocol. He exposed her timidity as self-protective and made the awful truth clear, she could either save her people or she would be lost along with her father's line. Who knows if she has not come to power just for that purpose? The ultimate question for Esther was what does she do with whatever power and position she has managed to gain. To save herself or to try and save her people. That's the question. It's a moral question and her answer reveals the person that she is. There is a "yes" or a "no" – a negative answer, then she would refuse to identify, she would refuse to stand up and her Jewishness and the Jewishness of her future would be lost. A positive answer meant possibly losing everything that life had given her and perhaps losing her life as well. It didn't seem fair. We can only image what poor Esther was going through. It was at that moment, however, that moment of truth, when she takes that leap from being a submissive girl to becoming powerful woman. Taking power and changing the balance of power fundamentally.

In response to the wives of these great political men, I will accept that I should not judge them too harshly. I cannot understand their level of powerlessness. But, I do know what I would say to my daughter. I would say to my daughter "*yeish gavul*," there is a boundary of acceptable behavior. When the boundary is transgressed, and we are put into shame, we don't need to accept further humiliation. It is time stand up for yourself. It will mean hard work; perhaps in preservation of a marriage if the "man" is willing to do the appropriate tshuvah, it may mean striking out in a new direction.

Esther serves as a model, just as Vashti before her. We learn that Vashti was exiled. Esther was much more fortunate. Esther not only saved her own life, but the life of her people. As a personal issue, we want our girls to grow up into women with strength, with power, with a sense of themselves who will not allow themselves to be shamed.

I want to speak about this on another level. It is not yet Purim. It is Shabbat Zachor. It is a time of remembrance, the time that we remember the enemy that brought so much pain and destruction upon our people. It is called Shabbat Zachor because of the special reading done at the end of Deuteronomy, Parshat Ki Teitze. There we read: *Zachor et Asheir Asa L'cha Amalek*, Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey after you left Egypt. How undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you when you were famished and weary and he cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all of your enemies around you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, as a hereditary portion you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heaven. *Lo tishkach*, do not forget. We have read that section and we have learned from that section and yet many lessons remain unlearned.

For centuries Jewish communities have lived with a sense of powerlessness. We have lived under the rule of both benevolent and hostile governments in our own ghettoed communities without the ability for self-determination. Through the centuries that we lived without political autonomy and power, we have lived our lives in response to a textual tradition. In the text we have learned about ideal models for our lives and also practical guides for survival, physical, spiritual and ethical in a very dangerous world. *Hafoch ba Hafoch ba d'kulei ba*, turn over the text and turn over the text because everything is found within it. The text has had a central role in defining the perimeters of Jewish life. It is through reading the Book and the books, the Torah and the Torah tradition that we have found inspiration for our ideals in a vision of how good the world can become. So we saw the text teaches us something about the role of women.

The transformation that I now want to look at is a different transformation. It's not personal but corporate. It is the transformation of the powerlessness of a people to a powerful people. I have noted in my conversations with Jews of various generations, that there is a clear divide between many of those of you who lived during the time of the Second World War and the Shoah and were profoundly touched by those atrocities. And those in the community who are connected to the world of Jewish power and Jewish success, and Jewish wealth, in this country and in Israel, but don't "remember" in the same way

. The election of Jews to governmental positions on all levels or presidents of universities or the numbers of Jewish programs in major college and university, the great institutions that we have built, the success of Jews in medicine and in science and business, etc. and on and on and on. The Jewish power that we have come to realize because of the existence of the state of *Israel* and its incredible strength. There are two ways of looking at the Jewish world. We can look at this glass as being half empty and we are barely present and we are constantly challenged and always on the verge of extinction. The "goyim" we think are always out to get us and continue to be and we have to live with a sense of *Oy gavalt, look* what is happening to us again. Or we look at the world and we say look at us and look at what we have become and look at the opportunities that we have and that we have created and look at our power and look at our strength. Which is it? Is it both?

First, I'd like us to look at what does it mean to have power? Through the eyes of Parshat Zachor we see: "Remember what Amalek did to us and then when we are in the land, then *w timche et zachor amalek*, blot out the reminder of Amalek. *Mi tachat hashamayim*, from under the heaven. *Lo tishchat*, do not forget. When we are independent then we have power then we can blot out zeicheir Amalek. What do those words mean? For some it is a call to the military battle; destroy the enemy, all of them, even their children! For some it is a call to simply pick up the grogger on Purim and blot out the name of Haman.

I would like to propose something. And it is a bit of a radical departure. It is something suggested by a colleague, Dr. Jack Bloom. To understand this, come back for a moment to my thinking about the text. "Turn it, and turn it again and everything is found in it." When we read the text, we read the following: "Remember what Amalek did for you on your journey after you left Egypt." *V'lo y'rai eloheim*" and you or he, did not fear God. The text is ambiguous. We are not sure who didn't fear God at that point. Different translations impose different meaning. *V'lo y'rai eloheim*.

I have taught: textual ambiguity demands interpretation. We are not sure when we read the text who was it that didn't fear God. It is obvious to us that Amalek was not God fearing. For what did he do? He cut down all the stragglers in the rear. He was a terrorist. He went after the women and he went after the children. He went after the weakest part of the Jewish community. No wonder we are commanded to blot him out. One who would take the life of the innocent is one who does not fear God. And the terrorist is to be "blot out." But, there is a second reading. In the second reading the people did not have fear of God. How can we say that? We can say it because of the history of the people in their wanderings. They were obstinate, they build the Golden Calf, and they argued with Moses, they defied God, they were rebellious and they complained, showed their lack of faith. But more than that: they allowed the women and children to be lost, straggling in the back.

What does fearing God mean? The expression is used in the beginning of the Book of Exodus when the midwives, Shifra and Puah who were ordered by Pharaoh to kill the newborn Israelite boys. They don't so because they fear God, *Yirei Eloheim*. The midwives understand something

and that is that babies, the weak and helpless are human. They are modeled after and they are molded by Divinity and therefore Shifra and Puah disobeyed Pharaoh; they risk their lives by lying to Pharaoh. So the text is clear. It is the fear of God that motivates compassion toward the helpless. Back to Amalek. Amalek infuriatingly attacks and kills those who can't keep up, the weak, the stragglers; he has no fear of God.

In the context of the reading, a *P'Zachor* "do not fear God" *lo yorei eloheim*. It doesn't apply to the stragglers; it may apply to those who were in command.

Imagine the scene:

At an Israelite army staff meeting an officer noted that there are those who are trailing behind the camp, they couldn't keep up. They were too young, they were too old, they were too hungry. There was an officer who stood up and said we have stragglers out there, women and children, the famished and the weary, the young and the old. We have to protect them. **BUT SOMEHOW THEY WERE NOT PROTECTED.** No troops were deployed. No army dispatched. No protection was provided. In our tradition, to be strong is not about domination of the others, but rather strength in controlling oneself and one's destiny. The fear of God refers to recognizing the ultimate personhood, the ultimate value of every human being in our midst; taking no one for granted. God's war with Amalek then is an eternal war against depersonalizing others. It's the kind of thinking that allows both Amalek and Israel to collude in what happened in the desert so long ago. This is a radical reading from a textual ambiguity. If you don't fear God then you allow the poor to remain impoverished, the oppressed to remain oppressed, the hungry to remain hungry, the homeless to remain homeless. But when you fear God, then you take your strength and you take your power and you do something about it.

Let me give you three examples: The first example comes from Sderot, the little town north of Gaza that is constantly being bombarded. Thousands and thousands of missiles are falling upon Sderot and with all of our strength, both in our advocacy here in the United States and the military strength of the State of Israel, there is not enough being done. So, innocent people are being killed and thank God not too many, being injured and being traumatized. To wipe Amalek is a call for all of us here to advocate for the town of Sderot. To allow Israel to do what it needs to protect its citizens and Israel must do what it needs to do to protect its citizens.

But we understand that our transformation from powerlessness to power as a community is not about becoming like those before us who are powerful. It is not about using our power to destroy or to oppress, but rather it is about using our power to live lives that reflect *Yirat Eloheim*, that reflect the fear of heaven, that reflect the fear of God, that reflect the love of God. That's what that means. It's about understanding God's presence in all living things and all being. And that's why the response to Sderot is not about reckless bombing and killing innocent lives – women and children. That's what Hamas does and wants us to do. That's Amalek and we are to wipe out that urge. But we have to support Sderot. And you will hear ways. Our use of power should make us different, because we have learned lessons in history. And there are particular projects that are in this synagogue that need to be done. This very strong, this very affluent population does not have to execute a program for Bar and Bat Mitzvah and Jewish education for emotionally challenged children. Where is our strength and where is our power?

I can tell you about strength and power and I don't do this to embarrass him. It is the strength and power that I have learned about from a place called Yemin Orde and we are so privileged and blessed this Shabbat to have in our midst Chaim Perry. Chaim Perry is truly one of my great heroes in this world. He doesn't know that. Yemin Orde is a place that has taken in thousands of children who are lost. Thousands of children, who are coming from oppressed countries, be it from Africa or Eastern Europe or South America or the United States. There are thousands of

children who come from dysfunctional families and gives them family and gives them a structure and gives them an education and gives them love and gives them a new life, teaches self respect. Because now with freedom and strength, we can do that for our children. That is what *Yerei Eloheim* is all about. To blot out Amalek is to say that when we have power, we don't use our power to oppress or to destroy or to neglect, no, but we use our power for Tikkun Olam, to make the world a better place.

In the Purim story there was a transformation of the people from their powerlessness to having power and with the transformation there was a mass destruction of people in Persia that took place. I have always been so uncomfortable with that part of the Megillah and what I realize is that story did not create an end to the abuse of power and anti-Semitism or the oppression of the Jewish people, but rather the story repeated itself over and over and maybe it is because the Jews of Shushan had it right for a while, but they used their power when they finally were saved. They used their power in the wrong way. They used it to kill. They used it to oppress others.

And so the cycle continued. We have the ability to learn from our past. We have the ability to create a different world. I find that's the beauty of who we are and what we have inherited and that I see is the beauty of the modern State of Israel, the imperfect place. Someone suggested that Israel should level Gaza or Israel should blow up the troubled camps of Palestinian refugees as a way with dealing with terrorism. We have to deal with terrorism. We have to find a way to put an end to terrorism. We don't do by being oppressive, for by losing *Y'ra Eloheim*, the sense of God's presence in the lives of children, of every child. I am frustrated but proud that Israel will not bomb indiscriminately. Every other country would do this or that if they were faced with what Israel is faced with. That's why we are not every other country of the world. That's why when all is said and done and the messianic era arrives, we will still celebrate Purim because we will have learned what it means to transform powerlessness to power and retain a sense of *Y'rai Eloheim*, of God's presence in our lives and the lives of our children and in the lives of all living.

Personal transformation of Esther. The transformation of our people is about gaining independence, drawing the boundaries, control of ourselves and each other and taking care of life...The text remains alive...and by turning it over again, it continues to teach.

I wish you all Shabbat Shalom and may we celebrate our survival and existence and our uniqueness together this week and every week of our lives.

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